

An Advisory Board for the Minister of Education.

Would Create an Educational Tammany.

LETTER FROM DR. SANGSTER.

(To the Editor of the Globe).

As the proposition to hamper the Ministership of Education with a so-called Advisory Board is just now prominently before the public, may I claim space in the *Globe* to express my strong conviction that the creation of such an adjunct to the department would be a blunder certain to prove detrimental to the educational interests of the Province.

Many persons suppose that the projected Advisory Board would be the counterpart of the late Council of Public Instruction. In this they are altogether wrong. The newer educational regime being organically distinct from the old, such a body would now be quite out of place and inoperative. A Council of Public Instruction was an almost necessary appendage to a chief Superintendent appointed by the Crown. It served to give weight to his recommendations to the Legislature and to the Government by covering them with the semblance of concert and careful co-elaboration. The late Council was composed of some of the most eminent and highly educated citizens of Toronto. It met the Chief Superintendent frequently, and discussed with him the educational concerns of the day. It was an admirably managed institution. Every cog and bearing of the machine was kept in perfect running order by an expert whose tact and *savoir-faire* were well nigh unapproachable. There was no friction, no sense of restraint, no shade of a suspicion that every spring, every wheel and every gearing was not self-acting, self-impelled and independent. But the Chief Superintendent was always master of the situation, at all times held the lever in his own hand, and switched the current on or off as suited his views. He combined plenty of the "suaviter in modo" with his "fortiter in re," but the "fortiter in re" was always there.

Dr. Ryerson was a man of strong convictions and of phenomenal will-power, as must be any man possessed of what is known as administrative ability. He was too large a personality to be easily turned aside or to suffer the Council, or ten such councils, to thwart him in his onward march towards the realization of his ideals. Hence, slightly altering the words of another great man, he might truly have said, "The Council of Public Instruction! I am the Council of Public Instruction."

In 1874 the constitution of that body was changed and it ceased to be a happy family. An elected element was then admitted. Political partyism, with its inevitable wrangling, crept in, the institution degenerated into something of the nature of a menagerie, or a bear garden, and, very shortly afterwards, on the extinction of the chief superintendency, as it had outlived its usefulness, the Government of the day very properly wiped it out of existence.

THE PROPOSED CHANGE.

The Minister of Education is already the most advised man in the land. The complaint is that he is not disposed to act on the advice so freely tendered to him. The present movement looks, therefore, not towards the appointment of a merely ornamental, because powerless, Advisory Board similar to the late Council, but towards what is really designed to be a Board of Educational control—a Board of School Trustees on a large and imposing scale, with the Minister for its Chairman. The creation of such a Board of Control, provided its members and its chairman were alike elected by the people, and responsible directly to the people, would outrage no sense of political propriety, nor would it conflict with the fundamental principles of responsible government, and, beyond pointing to the danger that it would sooner or later degenerate into an educational Tammany, I do not care to discuss it. But, to create such a Board of Control and to put into its President's chair a Minister of the Crown as its figurehead or mouthpiece, and then to attempt to hold him or the Government to which he is attached responsible for the department which he only ostensibly administers is a proposition so monstrous that one can hardly believe that it was ever seriously entertained.

THE SYSTEM IN ENGLAND.

It has, I believe, been claimed that a precedent for the creation of the projected Advisory Board can be found in the English Department of Education. No well-informed person will venture to make so startling a statement. The Committee of the Privy Council on education in England is essentially a Commit-

tee of the Government, and consists of members of the Cabinet, and men of Cabinet rank, who have seats in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords. The only official advisers of the Vice-President, who is the acting Minister of Education, are his colleagues in the Ministry, and the officials of the departmental staff.

Our system here is, in these respects, modelled on the English plan. The Ontario Government, of which the Minister of Education is a member, is the analogue of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education. Every one of Mr. Ross' fellow-members in the Cabinet is, by law, his adviser on matters educational. The whole Executive Council is, equally with him, responsible to the Legislature and to the country for the educational policy he is permitted to pursue, and, as self-preservation is the first law of nature, it may safely be assumed that his administration of affairs is, by his official associates, closely watched and freely criticized, and, on occasion, modified to suit the public needs, or in accordance with the public will. If his alleged autocracy—which many believe exists only in the imagination of his opponents—had been found to prevent his yielding to the requirements of his official associates, he would probably long ere now have been eliminated from the Cabinet. If, on the other hand, his individuality is so massive and so strong that he is able to hypnotize or otherwise dominate his seven or eight colleagues in the Government, then upon proof, not mere assertion, that such is the unfortunate state of affairs, the Government as a whole should be forced to give place to one composed of less plastic material.

OUR PRESENT SYSTEM.

Our educational system is one by no means perfect in all its parts. It is confessedly susceptible of material improvement in several directions and in sundry respects. Yet it justly sits enthroned in the confidence of our people, and it ranks second to no other system in the world. It shows, under its present strong and efficient management, a record in which we may all take pride. The vital educational interests of the State have been carefully guarded and advanced, a larger and a broader educational culture has been more generally diffused, and both the social and the professional standing of the teacher have been raised.

Its further elaboration and improvement is to be reached by moderated, well-considered and cautious movement, not by violent revolution or rash organic change. The country is not prepared, or ought not to be prepared, to accept retrogression for advance, or to endorse as practicable the fantastic reveries and

vague speculations and crude theories that are so abundantly set forth in times of political unrest. It does not want to see the efficient, and, upon the whole, eminently successful administration of an important department of the public service hampered or emasculated by the intrusion thereinto of a feature subversive of effective public control, and utterly at variance with every principle of responsible government. It wants no divided responsibility, no loopholes for personal evasion, no back doors of escape.

If the present or any future Ministry proves itself to be incompetent or unfaithful, or ill-advised, the country wants to be able to convict it, and to visit it with the condign punishment it will in that case have earned. And, to that end, it wants to see perpetrated no legislative blunders such as would be involved in the creation of the proposed Advisory Board.

A NON-PARTISAN VIEW.

Outside this question it is a matter of no moment or concern to me which side wins in the approaching contest. I have ever held myself aloof from political partyism. I have no political ties or sympathies. Only once before now have I ever written or said one word connected with the politics of the Province. On that occasion, eight years ago, I felt constrained to oppose the return of the Ontario Government to power, on the ground of what I believed to be its mistaken educational policy with respect to Separate Schools. I have no desire now to save Mr. Ross from any blame he may have deserved. I simply want to state that if either of our two great political parties in the present or in any future contest goes to the polls really pledged to hamper the administration of Mr. Ross, or of any other competent Minister of Education, by loading him with an Advisory Board, or with any similar old-man-of-the-sea, to serve as a hobble wherewith to paralyze his efforts to advance, or, when occasion requires, as a scapegoat by means of which he may shirk the responsibility which is or should be justly and only his—then, in common with most other thoughtful, independent men, I should regard the access of that party to power as a public calamity.

JOHN H. SANGSTER.

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